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From Literature and Religion to Literature and Science:
The Continuity of Degenerationism

An analysis on degenerationism in The Bacchae and The Yellow Wallpaper

Introduction

‘I don’t like to look out of the windows even-there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast. I wonder if they all come out of the wall-paper as I did?’ (Gilman, 1899): You might be wondering why I opened my paper with these lines from The Yellow Wallpaper, and more precisely why I chose some of the most obscure lines of the book. To your disappointment, it is not because I have deciphered their truest and deepest meaning, but because the more you will read of this essay, the more you will realize how much of it you haven’t understood.

The critics Hurley (1996), Karschay (2015), Mighall (2003) and Collins (2016) all treated the theory of degenerationism as an historical construct that arose from the affirmation of the theories of Darwin but also of Lamarck, Lombroso and Morel (Mighall, 2006). However, they all failed to analyze the nature of the link between the spread of these theories and the rise of the degenerationist theory in literature. For this reason, this paper elaborates on the nature of this relationship, proposing that what the critics seem to refer to as a causation is rather only a force that shaped and triggered the affirmation of degenerationism in the 19th century. More specifically, this essay proposes that the ‘gothic body’ ought not be considered as the main and only explication of degenerationism in literature, but rather as one of the forms in which this universal anxiety of men is expressed.

To do so, the text examines as a case study the tragedy *Bacchae* by Euripides in light of the concepts of degeneration and heredity as they have been defined by contemporary critics (in particular Hurley, Karshay and Mighall). Parallels and points of separations are then drawn between the greek tragedy and The Yellow Wallpaper following the constituent elements of the theory of ‘entropic bodies’ as outlined by Hurley (1996):

‘*Heredity* was not a vehicle of progress: it was an invisible source of *contamination*, with the *infection* jumping across bodies, across *generations*, and manifesting itself in visible *physical deformity*’¹

Accordingly, the paper is outlined as follows: to provide grounding on the claims of the subsequent paragraphs, the essay commences with a research context on how degeneration, the gothic body and atavism have been envisaged by critics (Hurley, 1996, Karschay, 2015, Mighall, 2003 and Collins, 2016), but also introduces one auxiliary text on The Yellow Wallpaper (Rodríguez Salas, 2012) and a brief introduction to Euripides’ tragedy,

¹ my italics

accompanied by some influential critical works on the latter (Bierl, 2013, Dodds, 1963, Goff, 2004, Jeanmaire, 1951, Saxonhouse, 2014). The successive paragraph offers evidence that 'reversed evolution' in literature is not a conception limited the 19th century but rather universal, present, for instance, even in ancient texts. The essay concludes with highlighting the specificities of its emergence in the fin-de-siècle gothic by analysing the role of science in literature and juxtaposing it to religion in literature.

Research context

In the last decade of the 20th century, Hurley (1996) began the long critical history on the adoption of degenerationism in the late-Victorian Gothic. He theorized that the fin-de-siècle gothic depicted individuals following a ciphered set of conventions borrowed from the theory of reversed evolution: the resultant of this representation is what he called the 'entropic body'. Hurley ascribed to this genre the adoption of four major canons: the proposition of a 'negative telos of abhumanness and cultural disarray', the devolution proceeding in an accelerated pace in comparison to evolution, the emphasis on 'the mutability and flux of human bodies', and finally the spread across society and generations.

At the rise of the 21st century, Mighall (2003) expanded Hurley's considerations by pointing out that the degenerate bodies were not solely 'at the margins of the empire', but rather that there was a 'double movement', outwards but also inwards towards 'the domestic 'savages' which resided in the very hearts of the civilised world'.

Karshay (2015) and Collins (2016) both stressed the importance of the concept of 'normativity', the demarcation between those who were included in society and the exclusion from society of the degenerate individuals. The first of the two critics claims that the concept was originated by the strict morality of the Victorian era, that divided the morally sane from the insane, while the second attributes this differentiation to the affirmation of biology (the bodies being more or less fit to the environment). Finally, Collins, coming back to Hurley's dissertations, attributes the instability of the body to the victory of materialism over formalism.

With regards to the *Yellow Wallpaper*, this essay refers to the analysis conducted by Rodriguez Salas (2012), who interpreted the text in terms of the concepts of feminism and patriarchal society: in her analysis, the short novel is an intermixture of two discourses, the first being that of 'gothic irrationality', in which the author/protagonist expresses her own

thoughts, and the second that of ‘science’, where we find her internalization of her husband’s discourse. The critic appropes to the conclusion that the text is ultimately feminist as it is the liberation of a woman from society and the triumph of the ‘gothic irrational’ discourse.

Lastly, *The Bacchae* is one of the last and greatest tragedies written by Euripides that granted him the first place at the Great Dionysia. The story is the following: Dionysus, who was born from the union between Zeus and the mortal woman Semele, was considered by the woman’s sisters and nephew Pentheus as a mortal, born from the incest between Semele and a mortal man. For this reason, the God of wine and illusions, who was given birth from Zeus’ leg in Lidia, comes back to Thebes (his mother’s polis) to get revenge over those who denied his divinity. To achieve his purpose, he incites all the women in the polis to celebrate his rites (the Bacchanals) and insinuates folly in them. After various vicissitudes, Semele’s sisters (while potted by Dionysus) tear to pieces and kill Pentheus. This is where the tragedy ends: Dionysus has accomplished his vengeance and Agave (Pentheus mother and Semele’s sister) realizes to have murdered her own son and is exiled from Thebes.

Due to the rather ambiguous nature of the text, the *Bacchae* was deeply analyzed by critics over the centuries. Out of the enormous literature behind it, Jeanmaire’s (1951) scrutiny on μανία (mania) and ἐνθουσιασμός (enthousiasmòs) which are the terms used to express the God’s potting of the Bacchants, and Dodds’ (1963) considerations on the Dionysian cult and the realism in Euripides’ depiction of the rituals, are the cornerstones on which this paper is based. It also adopts some ideas from Bierl (2013), Goff (2004) and Saxonhouse (2014).

The causes and features behind degenerationism

In this paragraph, through the parallelism between *The Bacchae* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*, this paper endeavors to show that the presence of characters that are undergoing a process of degeneration (as it is intended by the 19th century writers) in their lifetime was also present, for instance, in ancient Greece. To assert the continuity between the ‘degenerations’ happening in the two works, this section presents the causes of both ‘downward modifications’ and then tackles some lines belonging to both texts to trace in them the same features² highlighted by the critics.

² tendency to extreme normativity, the accelerated pace of the degeneration, the view of body as a flux and something deformed, its hereditarity and the presence of cases of degeneration within the ‘civilized society’

In the short novel by Gilman, the ‘seed of contamination’ resides, on the surface, in her ‘temporary nervous depression’ (pag. 1), as well as it appears to consist in Euripides’ tragedy of the ἐνθουσιασμός³ of Dionysus inside the minds of the Bacchae (Jeanmaire, 1951). However, both these causes were triggered and aggravated by more subtle events: with regards to the first, the real cause becomes clear in page 2 when the woman laments the impossibility to communicate her sickness to her husband: ‘John does not know how much I suffer. He knows *there is no reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him’. In the Bacchae, the same pattern occurs, the degeneration of the women of Thebes (carried out by Bacchus⁴) is caused by the blindness of a man (Pentheus) who does not officially recognize nor understand this divine ritual. From this, we start to see a division delineating: there are two, gendered, realms developing at the same time: the first is inhabited by women⁵ who are considered to have lost their judgement, while the second is that of society (represented by men) that cannot *see nor communicate with* the other realm.

In this last point, the presence of the first feature appears clear: both novels represent a normativized world, where the infection isolates from society (Collins, 2016). In the Bacchae, the seclusion is represented spatially: Dionysus informs us that the Bacchants ‘sit out there among the rocks, underneath green pine trees, no roof overhead’, they execute the rites outside the city (to be seen a metaphor for society) and are drawn towards the mount Cithaeron, which has ‘no roof overhead’. The words here are carefully chosen: the reference to the roof reconnects to the idea of the house, the patriarchal unit that comes with a set of rules and roles imposed by society. These are broken by the Bacchants as they are now escaping towards their freedom. A spatial seclusion is identifiable in *The Yellow Wallpaper* as well: the woman is caged in her room, described as an old nursery and playroom (all loci that unequivocally hint at the reason for her sickness: the child). In addition, the *Yellow Wallpaper*, as Rodriguez Salas (2012) points out, contains a second means of separation between the two plotlines: the adoption two distinct discourses to describe them.

A second feature that is clearly traceable in the two stories is the accelerated pace in which the degenerations happen. Gilman’s novel is set in a time interval of only four weeks, in

³ The word comes from the prefix ἐν (en) which means inside and θεός (theòs) God, thus attributing delirium and irrationality to the possession by a God of one’s mind.

⁴ another name for Dionysus

⁵ note that if we include Dionysus in this realm the gendered division still stands, as he is described multiple times in the text as having a rather feminine aspect. (i.e. Pentheus’ words when referring to Dionysus are ‘this effeminate stranger’)

which we witness the protagonist shift from an attempt to rationalize over her sickness, to creeping on the ground over the body of her fainted husband. In the tragedy, the matrix of degeneration, as it will be discussed below, is traceable back to the grandfather (Cadmus), however, the contamination of Agave (Pentheus' mother) and Pentheus reaches its summit in the span of a day, ending in the extinction of the prole (death of Pentheus) and exile of the others affected (Cadmus and Agave).

As for the idea of degeneration manifesting primarily in what Collins denominates 'internal transgressors' (non-marginal entities of society), there are pieces of evidence recurring in both texts: clearly Agave, being the daughter of the founder of Thebes (Cadmus) and the mother of its current ruler (Pentheus), was a preeminent figure in the town; but also the woman portrayed by Gilbert is integrated in society, as she is clearly educated, a writer but also well acquainted with design terminology⁶.

Coming to the most complex traits of degenerationism in literature, as they are the conception of the body and of heredity, it is important to notice how *The Yellow Wallpaper* has a first person narrator which leads to a complete absence of physical descriptions of the protagonist. To fill the gap, this paper considers the room in which she is isolated as a mirror to her individuality⁷. The gothicity of the body is present in *The Bacchae* in the costume they wear, described in multiple instances in the text, which signals the unstated importance it assumes. It is first mentioned in the parodos in the following lines:

‘O Thebes, nursemaid of Semele, put on your *ivy crown*. Consecrate yourselves to Bacchus. Dress yourselves in *spotted fawn skins*, trimmed with *white sheep's wool*. As you wave your *thyrsus*, revere the violence it contains.’

Each element, together with conferring a rather gothic aspect to the Bacchantes, is filled with metaphorical meaning: the crown is made of ivy as it symbolizes the triumphant blossoming of natural forces, the skins are of spotted fawns, animals known for their velocity and agility, abilities that the ritual will confer to the women; the sheep's wool is in the original text literally 'flakes of curls of white hair'⁸ which, more than its less immediate translation,

⁶ Noticeable for instance when she says: 'Looked at in one way each breadth stands alone the bloated curves and flourishes, a kind of debased romanesque with delirium tremens, go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity'

⁷ the assumption is based on two reasons: the first is the fact that the room seems to change and get more and more gothic as her insanity progresses and second based on the interpretation that views the wallpaper (part of the room) as a metaphor to her sickness (part of herself) thus by extension the room of herself.

⁸ μαλλόις πλοκάμων λευκοτρίχων (mallois plokamon leukotrichon)

reconnects the femininity and beauty of nature; in opposition to this, the last element, the thyrsus, has a phallic connotation, symbolizing the strength and violence the Bacchantes assume during the ritual.

The body of the woman in Gilbert's text is metaphorically characterized by the attributes of the room:

‘the floor is *scratched* and *gouged* and *splintered*, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great *heavy* bed which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the *wars*’,

She is weakened by her depression, probably emaciated by her lack of hunger, but heavy inside, the image of the bed nailed to the ground that has been through the wars is figuratively very powerful in representing this feeling.

Furthermore, in both cases the body is marked by its permeability, the woman is herself, but also the one behind the wallpaper and outside the window, as if the form of her body could not retain her anymore; the Bacchantes specularly are no longer the hosts of their body, Dionysus has taken possession of their minds (Saxonhouse, 2014).

Finally, the hereditarity of the ‘infection’ is directly detectable in Euripides’ tragedy, as it passes from Cadmus, the wisest and least sinful of the family but still titubant towards carrying out the rituals, to his daughter Agave, who invented the story of the incest of the sister to devalue Dionysus, and finally to Pentheus, who refused to worship his divinity. In the Yellow Wallpaper the only mention of heredity appears in the sentence: ‘there is one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wallpaper’. When internalizing the conjecture that the wallpaper is a metaphor of the infection, this sentence is interpretable as the manifestation of the woman's fear of contaminating her progeny. A vague sense of Gilman's belief in the hereditarity of her depression appears also in ‘All the fact of the case’ (Knight, 2005).

Conclusion: what is the role of these scientific discoveries of the 19th century?

To conclude, both texts present all the characteristics of the exploration of anxieties related to heredity and degeneration and thus provide evidence on the existence of this apprehension independently of the 19th century scientific advancement. However, what this paper has not treated yet is how these two approaches radically differ from each other. For this reason, the

part that follows contains my personal conjectures on these points of divergence and an attempt to theorize their reason.

More than two thousand years separate these two works and, with the passing of time, society also changed radically, specifically it has changed in its approach to irrationality. In ancient Greece, despite the atmosphere of general disquiet that the horror of this tragedy hints at, there was an openness to the idea that there could be an irrationality that is deeper and more cohesive in wisdom than rationality. This is metaphorically symbolized by the triumph⁹ of Dionysus (God of irrationality) over Pentheus (the rational king). Goff (2004) even theorized that the practice of rituals (such as the Bacchanals) by women ‘provided an environment where they could construct for themselves a highly visible and valuable presence in their communities’. On the other side, the blindness of the husband in Gilman’s novel was not considered punishable by Victorian society, but rather praiseable. I believe that the reason for this shifted view on irrationality and, more generally, on what is beyond the human scope; is caused by the distancing of society from religion (here referring more to pantheistic religions rather than Christianity) and its progressively closer contact with science. This is because, to my analysis, religion was linked to a belief in entities that existed beyond rationality, which made the person who could conceive them wiser than ordinary men, exemplary of this capacity is Tiresias. Per contra, it is also important to specify that already at the time in which Euripides lived the certainty in the metaphysical was starting to tremble (think of the sophists). It is only with the scientific fervour of the late Victorian era that fancy became reprehensible¹⁰ and that those who gave way to fancy were considered insane. The problem with irrationality was that it was not observable, and therefore not scientifically explainable.

Overall, the society’s view of science as rigid shaped degenerationism towards creating its anxieties about everything that was not explainable by reason (as, for example, mental health problems). but the root of this anxiety of heredity and reversed evolution has much deeper roots, certainly more than two thousand years.

⁹ As explicated in these lines from the tragedy: ‘It punishes all mortal men who honor their own ruthless wills, who, in their fits of madness, fail to reverence the gods. Gods track down every man who scorns their worship, using their cunning to conceal the enduring steady pace of time’

¹⁰ ‘John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least’ from the Yellow Wallpaper

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